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ABSTRACT

Instructors and students of literature should look to George McDonald Fraser's "Flashman: From the Flashman Papers, 1839-1842" for a clever critique of 19th-century notions of character, virtue, and moral teleology. Written to criticize Thomas Hughes's famous 19th-century novel, "Tom Brown's School Days," Fraser's 20th-century novel turns on end the Victorian assumption that courage, virtue, fortitude and leadership, as taught in the English schools, lead to good deeds and success in the real world. In Fraser's novel, Harry Flashman, the rogue and scoundrel from "Tom Brown's School Days," tells his side of the story through some papers that fall into the fictive narrator/editor's hands. Far from the failure "Tom Brown's School Day's" suggests he will grow up to be, Flashman, with none of the qualities needed for success, has acquired four inches of meritorious accomplishments in "Who's Who." In his old age, Flashman goes about explaining the discrepancy between his public image as a heroic soldier and his private notion of himself as cheat and fraud. He has no use for military character. By giving the reader an engaging and humorous rogue for a hero and narrator, Fraser can look at the history of the 19th century with the caustic vision and cutting satire associated with picaresque realism. (TB)

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Good Guys Finish Last:

Tom Brown's School Days and Flashman

By Frank P. Riga

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I wish to begin my paper by quoting from two brief sketches by Mark Twain. One is entitled "The Story of the Bad Little Boy," and the other, "The Story of the Good Little Boy." In "The Story of the Bad Little Boy," Twain begins, "Once there was a bad little boy whose name was Jim," and he then reviews a series of his nasty tricks, demonstrating just how bad this bad little boy was. Twain's conclusions contradict every expectation attached to the stories of little boys in didactic literature:

> This Jim bore a charmed life--that must have been the way of it. Nothing could hurt him. He even gave the elephant in the menagerie a plug of tobacco, and the elephant didn't knock the top of his head off with his trunk. He browsed around the cupboard after essence of peppermint, and didn't make a mistake and drink *aqua fortis*. He stole his father's gun and went hunting on the Sabbath, and didn't shoot three or four of his fingers off. He struck his little sister on the temple with his fist when he was angry, and she didn't linger in pain through long summer days, and die with sweet words of forgiveness upon her lips that redoubled the

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> anguish of his breaking heart. No; she got over it. He ran off and went to sea at last, and didn't come back and find himself sad and alone in the world, his loved ones sleeping in the quiet churchyard, and the vine-embowered home of his boyhood tumbled down and gone to decay. Ah, no; he came home as drunk as a piper, and got into the station-house the first thing.
>
> And he grew up and married, and raised a large family, and brained them all with an ax one night, and got wealthy by all manner of cheating and rascality; and now he is the infernalest wickedest scoundrel in his native village, and is universally respected, and belongs to the legislature.
>
> (Complete Short Stories, 8)

I will cite only a brief quotation from "The Story of the Good Little Boy." This little boy, Jacob, was so good that his ambition was "to be put in a Sunday-school book." The book was to have pictures:

> He wanted to be put in, with pictures representing him gloriously declining to lie to his mother, and her weeping for joy about it; and pictures representing him standing on the doorstep giving a penny to a poor beggar-woman with six children, and telling her to spend it freely, but not to be extravagant, because

> extravagance is a sin; and pictures of him magnanimously refusing to tell on the bad boy who always lay in wait for him around the corner as he came from school, and welted him over the head with a lath, and then chased him home, saying, "Hi! hi!" as he proceeded. That was the ambition of young Jacob Blivens. He wished to be put in a Sunday-school book.
>
> (Complete Short Stories, 68)

Contrary to the bad little boy who prospered, this good little boy meets a sorry and ignominious end. Twain ends the story: "Thus perished the good little boy who did the best he could, but didn't come out according to the books . . . His case is truly remarkable. It will probably never be accounted for."

I have quoted from these two stories, because they express in brief--and with Twain's customary acerbic and ironic wit--the inverse relationship between Thomas Hughes's Tom Brown's School Days and George MacDonald Fraser's Flashman, the twentieth century response to this well-known nineteenth century book for boys. In order to explore the relationship--or perhaps better, the polemical dialogue--between the Flashman series and Tom Brown's School Days, I wish to look briefly at the nineteenth century novel and its social and educational message. Then, I will discuss how the Flashman novels respond to the exemplary image of Tom

Brownism, the parallel Twain's "good little boy," by reversing expectations attached to the figure of the "bad little boy."

The boys' books of the Victorian era, like children's books of every era, reflected the needs and ideals of their time. And the Victorian period for the English, like the present time for Americans, was an historic turning point. A critical view of that period was suggested by H.G. Wells.

> In the closing years of the 19th century, it was assumed, as the reader may verify by an examination of the current literature of the period, to be a natural and inevitable thing that all the world should fall under European domination. With a reluctant benevolent air, the European mind prepared itself to take up what Mr. Rudyard Kipling called "the White Man's Burden"--that is to say, the lordship of the earth. (988)

Europeans, and especially Englishmen, never doubted their fitness to do this job. They never doubted, in A.P. Thorton's words, "that the imposition of their ideas and habits on 'lesser breeds without the law' . . . could be anything other than good" (Doctrines of Imperialism 156).

Men of a certain character were needed to take up the Burden--and not incidentally, to administer the Empire--and

among the institutions most responsible for producing such men were the English public schools. As any number of observers have noted, the development of character and the training for leadership, more than intellectual brilliance, were always the justification for the existence of England's public schools. Character was defined by the qualities of bravery and initiative, integrity and loyalty, with the self-respect that was their reward. The 19th century public schools, according to A.P. Thornton, "were founded with no other purpose than to inculcate these qualities in the young" (Doctrines of Imperialism 171). This view of education was clearly reflected in the boy's school story, and particularly in the model of the genre, Tom Brown's Schooldays.

Though school stories existed before the work of Thomas Hughes, the full potential of the school story was not realized until 1857, when Tom Brown's Schooldays appeared with immediate and huge success. The novel went through five large editions in the first nine months and the demand never slackened. Within its first 30 years, 66 editions were published. To my knowledge, it has never been out of print. Hughes himself was closely associated with F.D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley in the Christian Socialist Movement. They championed the working classes, advocated lyceums, libraries, and clubs, and they helped to establish the Working Men's College in London. Appropriately enough,

Hughes taught boxing at the College, and later, he founded Rugby, a cooperative settlement in Tennessee, for the adventurous sons of Brown who had the right stuff to become American pioneers. The settlement was named after the famous British public school and it still exists as a tourist attraction outside of Knoxville.

But the famous Head Master of Rugby, Dr. Thomas Arnold, did not subscribe to the "Muscular Christianity" of the Christian Socialists, though his school was to produce the kind of men necessary for governing the Empire. In Tom Brown's School Days, the ideal of the Empire Man was defined indirectly by those qualities that the narrator notes in one of Arnold's sermons: "we listened . . . to a man whom we felt to be, with all his heart and soul and strength, striving against whatever was mean and unmanly and unrighteous in our little world." But this puts the case negatively. Tom Brown's father, meditating on his boy's education, thinks: "If he'll only turn out a brave, helpful, truth-telling, Englishman, and a gentleman, and a Christian, that's all I want . . . " (68). By the end of the novel, Tom's education has changed him from a spirited good-hearted, but thoughtless boy to a thoughtful young man capable of leading others. Through his development we see how those responsible for running English society and the British Empire were trained. As the commission investigating the public schools reported in 1864, the

schools trained the boys in "the essential English qualities--their capacity to govern others and to control themselves, their aptitude for combining freedom with order, their public spirit, their vigour and manliness of character, their strong but not slavish respect for public opinion, their love of healthy sports and exercise" (Briggs 159).

But not all public school boys worked and lived up to this high standard, and among the best-known of these slackers was Harry Flashman, Tom Brown's fellow Rugbyite, "the School-house bully," and a cowardly blackguard. Our first glimpse of him is on the football playing field where he feigns dangerous exploits, but where he never chances getting hurt or bruised "for the glory of School-house" (92). One of his roommates describes him as "a dirty little snivelling, sneaking fellow" who "used to toady the bullies by offering to fag for them and preaching against the rest of us" (140). When Brooke and other natural leaders graduate, Flashman and his cronies take over, and from this time on, Tom Brown and his friend, Harry "Scud" East, "began to feel the weight of the tyranny of Flashman and his friends" (136). Flashman has a special hatred for Tom and East because, in their altercations, the younger boys "openly called him coward and sneak,--the taunts were too true to be forgiven" (142). The bad blood between them finally erupts in a fistfight. After Tom and East beat him

in the fight, "They had done with Flashman in one sense, for he never laid a finger on either of them again; but whatever harm a spiteful heart and venomous tongue could do them he took care should be done" (153). Such an incorrigible character could hardly be expected to lead society and empire, and his fate is apparently sealed when he is expelled from Rugby for drunkenness. But this was before George MacDonald Fraser was entrusted to edit the remarkable Flashman Papers.

Let me now turn to the Flashman papers, and especially Flashman, the first novel in the series. Fraser clearly signals his satirical intent by naming his series after the cowardly bully of Tom Brown's School Days and by letting Flashman himself narrate the events of his life. The series purports to explain how this former school bully and bad little boy becomes a much honored military hero and eminent Victorian. Instead of demonstrating how this disreputable character comes to an evil end, then, the writer instead deails how Flashman, against all odds, and against all expectations succeeds time and again under the most unlikely of circumstances. The Flashman series consists of a kind of picaresque novel, in which the protagonist appears as a major participant in some of the most notable historic events of the 19th century. He manages to be present at all of that century's great military catastrophes: an incomplete list includes the retreat from Kabul during the

First Afhan War in 1841, the charge of the Light Brigade during the Crimean War in 1854, the defeat at Cawnpore during the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, Pickett's charge at Gettysburg during the Civil War in 1863, and in the latest novel of the series, John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859. And yet, in the midst of such defeats, again and again, he comes out victorious, rewarded for his rascality and decorated for his cowardice.

George MacDonald Fraser, representing himself as the fictive editor of the newly discovered Flashman Papers, informs us:

> A point of major literary interest about the papers is that they clearly identify Flashman, the school bully of Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, with the celebrated Victorian soldier of the same name. The papers, are in fact, Harry Flashman's personal memoirs from the days of his expulsion from Rugby School in the late 1830s to the early years of the present century (n.p.).

This identity is picked up early in the novel by Flashman when he notes that "it is my purpose to show how the Flashman of Tom Brown became the glorious Flashman with four inches in Who's Who and grew markedly worse in the process . . . " (29) His reference to Who's Who calls attention to

his lengthy entry that reads, in part, that Sir Harry "Served U.S. Army (Major, Union Forces, 1862; Colonel [staff] Army of the Confederacy, 1863)." This item intimates some kind of double-dealing. In later life, he was named honorary president of the "Mission for Reclamation of Reduced Females"; to give such an honor to this perpetually primed philanderer is, to use the time-worn cliché, like setting the fox free in the hen house. Seen from the perspective of a delighted reader of the series, these hints reveal the outrageous, and hilarious, behavior of the novels' anti-hero. But in his old age, Flashman himself is not reticent in telling the truth about himself.

> This story will be completely truthful; I am breaking the habit of eighty years. Why shouldn't I? When a man is as old as I am, and knows himself thoroughly for what he was and is, he doesn't care much. I'm not ashamed, you see; never was--and I have enough on what Society would consider the credit side of the ledger--a knighthood, a Victoria Cross, high rank, and some popular fame. So I can look at the picture above my desk, of the young officer in Cardigan's Hussars; tall, masterful, and roughly handsome I was in those days (even Hughes allowed that I was big and strong, and had considerable powers of being pleasant), and say that it is the portrait of a scoundrel, a liar, a cheat, a

> thief, a coward--and, oh yes, a toady. Hughes said more or less all these things . . . (11)

That is, he is the same deplorable, toad-eating bully that plagued the pages of Tom Brown's School Days. With none of the qualities needed for heroic success, he yet manages accomplishments that merit four inches of space in Who's Who (however dubious those accomplishments are in fact).

Flashman thus sets about explaining this discrepancy between his public life and his private life. The autobiographical, satiric narrative is the perfect form for this task, especially as the subject of the memoirs constantly finds himself in the midst of verifiable historic events. He intrudes himself, so to speak, into the interstices of history. Because his public life can be verified, we are prompted to believe what he tells us of his feelings and motivations--and the mercurial events of his private life.

The major historic event in Flashman, the initial volume of the series, is the catastrophic retreat from Kabul in 1841, during the First Afghan War. Like Falstaff, Flashman is "a coward on instinct." Early on, he has accurately read the signs of coming disaster and prepares a special company of cavalry to aid him in his escape when the time comes. In the meantime, he and his men ride furiously back and forth,

from one end of the retreating army to the other, supposedly acting as messengers and as a mobile fighting force to protect the army against enemy forays. But in fact this meaningless bravado, while ensuring Flashman's high visibility, allows him to discover the enemy's movements and to keep safely out of harm's way. When he gets caught in a fire-fight purely by accident, and is praised by his peers for what amounts to hotfooting from the place of danger, he can later report of the incident:

> They went off, and I heard Broadfoot telling Pollock what a madman I was when it came to a fight--"when we were fighting in the passes, it was Flashman every time that was sent out as galloper to us with messages; ye would see him fleein' over the sangars like a daft Ghazi, and aye wi' a pack o' hostiles howling at his heels. He minded them no more than flies."
>
> That was what he made out of the one inglorious occasion when I had been chased for my life into his incampment. But you will have noticed, no doubt, that when a man has a reputation good or bad, folk will always delight in adding to it; there wasn't a man in Afghanistan who knew me but who wanted to recall having seen me doing something desperate, and Broadfoot, quite sincerely, was like all the rest. (225)

Such public misconceptions of his private ends gain him an audience with the Queen, attended on by the great Duke of Wellington, himself, where he is awarded a one-of-a-kind royal medal.

As for the manliness that Hughes believed was one of the great virtues taught at Rugby, Flashman realizes that he neither has it nor wants it. Such a virtue, especially when it is referred to as bravery or courage, may exist, and perhaps does exist, but it is both misrepresented and immensely unprofitable. In a discerning thumb-nail sketch of James Brudenell, Earl of Cardigan, now best remembered for leading the charge of the Light Brigade into the Valley of Death at Balaclava, Flashman notes that many commentators "say that at least he was brave. He was not. He was just stupid, too stupid ever to be afraid."

> Some human faults are military virtues, like stupidity, and arrogance, and narrow-mindedness. Cardigan blended all three with a passion for detail and accuracy; he was a perfectionist, and the manual of cavalry drill was his Bible. Whatever rested between the covers of that book he could perform, or cause to be performed, with marvelous efficiency, and God help anyone who marred that performance. He would have made a first-class drill sergeant--only a man with a mind

> capable of such depths of folly could have led six regiments into the Valley at Balaclava. (28-9)

By putting into question, not only Lord Cardigan's courage, but the nature of the military character, this quotation epitomizes the depth and range of the book's satire. For the ordinary soldier, moreover, courage reaps no profit. As he says about Scud East, "one of Arnold's sturdy fools" and a "manly little chap": "he was a fool [at Rugby], and a fool twenty years later, when he died in the dust at Cawnpore with a Sepoy's bayonet in his back. Honest Scud East; that was all his gallant goodness did for him" (15).

Told from the comic viewpoint of a poltroon and opportunist, the Flashman series are historic novels in the picaresque tradition. By giving us an engaging and humorous rogue for a hero and narrator, Fraser can look at the history of the Nineteenth Century with the caustic vision and cutting satire associated with picaresque realism, that form loved by many of the world's great novelists, from Le Sage and Cervantes, through Fielding and Swift, to Carlo Collodi and Nathaniel West. More specifically, Fraser's books are reminiscent of Byron's great comic epic, Don Juan, another book that seems to have unlimited comic possibilities that are not only funny but in dead earnest, as well. And like Don Juan, the Flashman Papers tangle with the vicissitudes of war and politics, heroes and heroism,

love and sex, marriage and infidelity--all, that is, of the immense variety and absurdity of human life. In the narrative process, Fraser can subvert pet theories and naive convictions about history and biography because his fiction scrutinizes and judges the history and biography from which it is made. Nor does Fraser fail to pay his disrespects to Thomas Hughes and his hero, Dr. Thomas Arnold of Rugby. If, as Arnold taught, character makes destiny and if education can build the kind of character that can influence the world for good, Flashman is here to remind us that such a view of human nature, whatever its strengths, is much too limited and is not fully believed even by those who promulgate it. At the end of the novel, after achieving the status of official hero, Flashman imagines Arnold's voice saying:

> "There is good in you, Flashman," and I could imagine how he would have supposed himself vindicated at this moment, and preach on "Courage" in chapel, and pretend to rejoice in the redeemed prodigal--but all the time he would know in his hypocrite heart that I was a rotter still. But neither he nor anyone else would have dared to say so. This myth called bravery, which is half-panic, half-lunacy (in my case, *all* panic), pays for all; in England you <u>can't</u> be a hero <u>and</u> bad. There's practially a law against it. (248)

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